

Message Text

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 6741

INFO AMEMBASSY LAGOS

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AMEMBASSY PARIS

C O N F I D E N T I A L LIBREVILLE 1249

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: PFOR, GB, NI

SUBJ: BONGO ON NIGERIA

SUMMARY. GABONESE PRESIDENT BONGO CONCERNED OVER NIGERIAN STABILITY IN WAKE GOWON OUSTER AND PREDICTS SHORT TENURE FOR MURTALA MOHAMMED. END SUMMARY.

1. IN COURSE OF DISCUSSION WITH PRESIDENT BONGO FOLLOWING CREDENTIALS PRESENTATION AUGUST 9 (SEPTTEL NOTAL), PRESIDENT DEVOTED NEARLY FIFTEEN MINUTES TO RECENT EVENTS IN NIGERIA AND ESPECIALLY TO ACCOUNT OF HIS PRIVATE MEETING WITH GOWON AT KAMPALA FOLLOWING COUP WHICH CHANGED FMG.

2. ACCORDING TO BONGO, GOWON APPEARED ALMOST RELIEVED THAT COUP HAD TAKEN PLACE AND ADMITTED THAT IT HAD COME AS NO REAL SURPRISE. GOWON TOLD BONGO THAT HE HAD NEVER FELT COMFORTABLE WITH DECISION ANNOUNCED LAST OCTOBER 1 TO DELAY INDEFINITELY RETURN TO CIVILIAN RULE, SINCE THIS WAS VIOLATION OF PROMISE HE HIMSELF HAD MADE FOUR YEARS EARLIER. SINCE THAT TIME, HE HAD BECOME INCREASINGLY ILL AT EASE IN HIS POSITION, AND WAS THUS OT UNHAPPY TO BE RELIEVED OF BURDEN OF OFFICE.

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3. GOWON TOLD BONGO THAT HE FIRST GOT WORD OF POSSIBLE COUP SHORTLY BEFORE OAU CONFERENCE. AT THAT TIME, HE CALLED IN GARBA AND TOLD HIM HE HAD HEARD THAT LATTER MIGHT BE INVOLVED IN PLOTTING HIS OVERTHROW. AS RECOUNTED BY BONGO, GOWON REPORTEDLY REAFFIRMED HIS FAITH IN GARBA'S LOYALTY, BUT ADDED TO GARBA THAT IF HIS FAITH WERE MISPLACED THEN "LET WHATEVER HAPPENS BE ON YOUR CONSCIENCE."

4. BONGO EXPRESSED CONCERN ABOUT NIGERIAN UNITY UNDER MURTALA MOHAMMED'S REGIME, PARTICULARLY IN LIGHT MURTALA'S PAST HAR-LINE APPROACH TO PROBLEM OF POST-CIVIL WAR RECONCILIATION. BONGO SAID, HOWEVER, THAT GOWON HAD ASSURED HIM NIGERIAN UNITY WAS SOLID AND COULD NOT AGAIN BE SHAKEN IN WAY THAT HAD HAPPENED A DECADE AGO. NONETHELESS, BONGO PREDICTED THAT NIGERIA IS IN FOR FURTHER UNREST, AND THAT MURTALA MOHAMMED UNLIKELY REMAIN LONG AT HELM OF FMG.

5. COMMENT: BONGO'S VIEW OF NIGERIAN EVENTS UNDOUBTEDLY REMAINS COLORED BY HIS SUPPORT FOR BIAFRA DURING CIVIL WAR AND HIS LINGERING DISTRUST OF SUCH HARD-LINE NORTHERNERS AS MURTALA. IN ADDITION, HE APPEARS TO HAVE GENUINE FONDNESS FOR GOWON, PRESUMABLY ARISING IN LARGE PART FROM APPRECIATION OF GOWON'S POST-WAR RECONCILIATION POLICIES. AS RESULT THESE FACTORS, HIS GLOOMY PREDICTION ABOUT MURTALA'S FUTURE INVOLVES SOME MEASURE OF WISHFUL THINKING, BUT NONETHELESS SUGGESTS HE IS LIKELY TO KEEP WARY EYE ON NEW FMG UNTIL SATISFIED OF ITS STABILITY AND GOOD INTENTIONS.
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